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When the move to Georgia was announced, Rachel, age 14, felt her world was coming to an end. She was being uprooted from her lifelong home, intense junior high friendships and a close-knit swim team. She wrote to her mother, JoBeth, in their dialogue journal:

> *I think I'm the saddest about the move. I've got to be. I cry every time it's even mentioned--I'm gonna dehydrate!!! NOTHING is up about this--you should know--my attitude's not going to change. I cry every night--cry myself to sleep. Praying that I'll wake up --not having to move...*

In that distant and dreaded land, Georgia, another parent and child were communicating via their dialogue journal. Tim and Mikey, age 6, wrote of soccer games, sailing and school. The topics these parents and children discussed and the intensity of the discussion were dramatically different. However, the roles that the journals played in their relationships were the same: opportunities to share thoughts, to solve problems, to gain information and to express feelings.

"...opportunities to share thoughts, to solve problems, to gain information and to express feelings..."

In this article, we will share what we have learned as parents engaging in dialogue journals with our children. As teacher educators we will suggest ways in which teachers can encourage students and their parents to dialogue through these interactive journals.

Theoretical Background

We are learning that children become literate when they have many opportunities to engage in purposeful meaning-oriented encounters with print (Mason and Allen,

1986). Corresponding with relatives, sharing notes with other family members, labeling belongings and other functional writing and reading play an important role in the development of children's literacy at home (Taylor, 1983). Encounters with print are most effective when a "literate other" responds to the child's questions, reinforces insights and challenges further investigation of the written code (Bruner, 1983).

"...many teachers are moving toward teaching reading and writing as ongoing processes..."

In efforts to provide meaningful school opportunities, many teachers are moving away from text-centered curricula and assigned, graded writing toward teaching reading and writing as ongoing processes and involving students in the many pragmatic functions of literacy (Goodman and Goodman, 1983). As teachers attempt to structure their classrooms to encourage both reading and writing processes, they encourage students to read and write for a variety of purposes. They recognize the importance of audience and of honoring children's own background and interests. Teachers respond to the intent and meaning of the child's message. These reading and writing process classrooms (Hansen, Newkirk & Graves, 1985) are liberating children from disjointed "literacy" activities.

However, in classrooms where children choose their own topics, their own writing genre and their own books to read, involvement with poetry, essay or persuasion may be infrequent. Children in writing process classrooms tend to write personal narratives and action fiction; other genre do not seem to develop as readily (Calkins, 1986). Likewise, this limits the kinds of peer-authored texts available for classroom reading.

Dialogue journals, journals in which two people engage in an ongoing written conversation, are one way to involve students in writing for a specific audience (the journal partner), for specific purposes (set by the participants) using such language skills as persuasion, questioning and answering, development of an argument and critical thinking. Journals in general, and dialogue journals in particular, have been recommended as instructionally productive activities for school settings (Atwell, 1984; Gambrell, 1985; Kirby & Liner, 1981; Roderick & Berman, 1984; Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1985). Teachers who become partners with their students in the ongoing and recursive reading and writing of dialogue journals encourage literacy development and share in a more personal side of their students (and themselves) that may not be otherwise possible. Positive personal relationships and mutual trust are important outcomes of dialogue journals (Staton, 1984). Dialogue journals also promote multifaceted growth in reading and writing (Atwell, 1984; Gambrell, 1985;

Greenlee, Hiebert, Bridge, & Winograd, 1986). Besides being a vehicle for the actual practice of reading and writing, dialogue journals can also become a forum upon which to reflect on reading and writing. In the Atwell (1984) study, for example, students and teacher used dialogue journals to write about their own reading. They shared with one another the books they were reading. They commented on how the books were written and how the books made the reader feel. Students' reflections on their reading later influenced their own writing.

One problem that we often hear when we talk with teachers about dialogue journals is that, when combined with all the other tasks a teacher faces, maintaining an honest dialogue in writing with every student in a class can easily overwhelm even the most energetic teacher. This is especially true in process-oriented classrooms where an extensive amount of time is involved in reading writing folders, learning logs, etc. each evening in preparation for conferences and instruction the next day, leaving little time to respond to journals. Honest responses to children's entries in dialogue journals require considerable thought and reflection.

One solution which extends writing outside the classroom and simultaneously creates a very real purpose for writing is for children and parents to dialogue in journals at home. Positive parent-child relationships require frequent and honest communication. As educators as well as parents we have experienced the positive effects that dialogue journals have had on our relationships with our children, and on our mutual literacy development.

In the following section, we will discuss characteristics of successful dialogue journal interactions and suggest ways in which teachers might get parents involved in keeping journals with their children.

Effective Dialogue Journal Principles

We adapt guidelines established by Kreeft, Staton, and Gutstein (1984) for student-teacher journals to our own parent-child journals. These guidelines include intrinsic purpose, equal engagement, freedom of topic, frequency of communication and development of personal relationships.

Intrinsic Purpose

The purpose for keeping a dialogue journal is rooted within the communicative needs of the participants. Purposes are not forced upon any participant. Purposes may change as old needs are ameliorated and new needs come to the fore.

For Tim and Mikey the original need for the dialogue journal arose from Tim's occasional late nights at the office. At times he would not arrive home until Mikey had already gone to bed. The dialogue journal allowed them to "talk" about their days when they were not able to be together.

During the autumn Tim was unable to attend Mikey's last soccer game of the season. When he returned from work late that night Mikey was already in bed. Tim found this short dialogue journal entry next to a small trophy that every member of the team had been awarded:

November 18. Dear Daddy. Look what I got at soccer today! Love Mikey.

Tim was able to reply immediately to the note Mikey had left for him:

Dear Mikey. Boy, what a nice trophy you received. I am very proud of you. Mommy told me that your team also won the game and that you played very well. I think that's great. I'm sorry I wasn't able to make it to your game. Would you like to kick the ball around in the yard after school? Love, Daddy.

As time has progressed the purpose for Tim and Mikey's dialogue journal has changed to one of sharing thoughts, feelings, jokes, riddles, asking personal questions, etc.

Rachel and JoBeth had a very different purpose for writing, one precipitated by Rachel's anger and subsequent hostile behavior related to an impending move. JoBeth wrote on the first page of the cloth covered journal:

Right now, it seems to me we communicate better in writing...remember the poems? So if you are willing, I'd like for this to be a communication journal, a place where we can interact without the pressure of a face to face attempt, which often ends with us angry or frustrated or refusing to talk. If we want, we can talk about things that we write to each other; or we may want to write "not for discussion yet" and stick to the journal. What do you think?

Within an hour, Rachel had returned the journal, opening with, "It's a good idea, I agree." The acceptance was followed by a torrent of words, words of bitterness, frustration, accusation. With purpose firmly, if painfully, established, they proceeded.

Equal Engagement

Kreeft et al. (1984) note that in successful dialogue journals, "Both parties are engaged equally in the interaction--providing and seeking information, introducing and elaborating on topics..." (p. 1). Although the parent-child relationship was often evident ("How could you take my phone away?" "Why have you abused your phone privileges?"), there was often more equality in the journal than in other daily interactions.

In three consecutive entries, JoBeth attempted to get Rachel to respond to the question, "Who are you?" in response to Rachel's poignant assertion that her mother wasn't allowing her to grow up, to become her own person.

I'm just so sad that I'm not the little girl you longed for. Next to me, at my desk, I have a picture of me, a young girl. That's the girl you want, the daughter you want. I'm sorry to disappoint you.

So JoBeth asked:

Back to the little girl Rachel and the growing woman Rachel--which characteristics do you think are and always will be at the heart of who you are?

Rachel continued to pour out her anger, to enumerate and elaborate her mother's faults. JoBeth responded to her feelings, but again asked Rachel to respond to the question. Rachel continued to set the agenda of "hot" issues, ones she demanded her mother respond to. JoBeth did, closing the entry with another attempt:

Who do you think you are, deep down at the core of Rachel?

And finally Rachel answered:

I am a person, very sensitive to what others think of me. Nobody knows my personal feelings. I've always been a very carefree, daring person. But moreso very caring. My friends need me. And I need them...I've always been so independent, yet still clutching those golden years of childhood. My independency is coming out now, those childhood years are past now. I'm taking on many responsibilities you know nothing about.

At this, and many other points in the journal, there was a negotiation not only of issues, but of communicative priorities. Strong feelings, on the part of either writer, demanded to be dealt with; philosophical questions and "chatty" attempts to defuse volatile situations were secondary. Kreeft et al. (1984) argue that this equality of engagement "means that one person does not dominate or control the direction of the interaction with questions or directives, but also is willing to respond to the questions of the other person" (p. 1).

Freedom of Topic

Given equal engagement, it is not surprising that journal topics ran a gamut of concerns and interests.

The topics in Tim and Mikey's journal were wide ranging. They generally focused on the day's events and, since such events can occur in many areas, Tim and Mikey found themselves writing about buying sailboats, favorite television shows, kool-aid stands, soccer games, etc. The topics reflected the interests of both father and son. Whenever one broached a topic the other responded before going on to another topic.

Rachel and JoBeth also explored a variety of topics, issues vital to adolescent-parent development. They shared stories of first loves, of girl-friends who attempted suicide and of mothers who expected too much. They negotiated rules and "cried" together over leaving their longtime home and treasured friends. For both sets of parent-child writers, the journals became more than a detached commentary on life; they became a vital part of living.

Modeling

If a pedagogical relationship does exist in dialogue journals between parents and children, it occurs at the level of modeling. Mikey's first entries in the journal were replete with invented spellings, unconventional format and general messiness (see Figure 1). Tim made his entries in the format of an informal letter. He also tried to make neatness an overt part of his own journal entries. It wasn't long before Mikey's own entries demonstrated a marked improvement in form and neatness (see Figure 2). This was accomplished without one word of direction from Tim. Tim and Mikey responded to the meaning that the other attempted to convey in the passage. Yet in the end Mikey studied his father's model and incorporated those elements he felt salient into his own writing.

April 21, 1986

Happy Birthday Mikey. I hope you have a nice day today. Tell me what was the best thing that happened to you today. love, Daddy.

the Prasint or the Bast thing thank you for the latar

Figure 1

An Early Dialogue Journal Entry

Figure 2

A Later Dialogue Journal Entry

The modeling JoBeth presented for Rachel was at a very different level, and probably less intentional. JoBeth served as a model for problem solving; several times she asked Rachel to consider options, or listed options she herself had considered in similar situations. Probably the most important modeling was an interactive one, whereby both JoBeth and Rachel learned the power of writing for thinking aloud, for sorting through feelings, for dealing with difficult emotions.

Frequency of Communication

Kreeft, et al. (1984) note that in school dialogue journals the communication between parties is frequent and continuous over an extended period of time. However, in an article on interpersonal uses of dialogue journals, Staton (1984) recognizes a different pattern for home journals. "Parents who have been able to maintain a journal with a child find that these dialogues seem to be effective only on a time-limited basis, and may not even last a year. It may be that with children, there are years of their lives in which a private conversation on paper with one parent is needed and useful, while the next year, the need for the dialogue diminishes" (p. 2).

Our experience has been that the frequency of the communication depends upon its purpose. The Allens found this to be true. The last entry in their journal, dated eleven months after the first, reads, in part:

> *Do you want to write again, or should we just save the journal for when we are having trouble communicating?*

As of this writing, the entry is unanswered.

During the period when Tim was away from home several evenings a week, the journal communications between Tim and Mikey were more frequent than at present when he is home more evenings. However, when Tim has asked Mikey if he wished to end the journal experience, Mikey has expressed a desire to continue. Tim and Mikey are comfortable with a less frequent schedule of communications at present, enjoying the long awaited message as one enjoys receiving an unexpected package from a friend in the mail.

Developing Personal Relationships

Kreeft, et al. (1984) discuss how privacy and time for rereading and reflection contribute to meaningful dialoguing. With parent-child journals, we see these characteristics as contributing to the main purpose in keeping our interactive journals: developing the relationship. Oral dialogue offers little time to reflect on the meaning of the message conveyed before having to respond. In times of stress this inability to reflect, to dig deeper into the message sent by the other, can result in unintended, hurtful, or insensitive replies to messages. Children, especially, are often uncomfortable in having to give immediate replies to sensitive inquiries.

Dialogue journals allow for private reflection. When one person shares his or her feelings on the page, even when those feelings run the risk of damaging

the relationship with the other, the feelings can be reflected upon by the reader. In the case of parent-child relationships, where verbal exchanges often lead to negative consequences for the relationship, opportunities for reflection are opportunities to nurture relationships. Parents, especially, can use reflection to understand the feelings, concerns, motivations, and desires of the child and respond sensitively to the child, thereby developing trust and keeping open lines of communications.

When Mikey hadn't responded to one of Tim's entries for several days Tim reminded him. Finally, when he did respond, Mikey addressed the feelings of the person he felt he may have offended:

Daddy: I am really sorry that I haven't rote you a note.

Ironically, Tim took several days longer than he should have to respond to Mikey's entry. He wrote remorsefully:

Dear Mikey: I am sorry for taking so long to write to you, especially after telling you that you take too long to write...

In both instances the opportunity to distance oneself from one's own actions allowed for a response that was sensitive to the other person's feelings.

Many of Rachel's entries were accusatory and angry. Shortly after "The Move," Rachel wrote:

How can you take EVERYTHING away from me and not expect me to grasp back for it? Do you know what it's like not to have anyone to cry to? I have no one...I just can't handle this. I just can't!...I miss my town. I miss my friends. (At this point the writing becomes very large, sloppy, very dramatic in form.)...<u>WHY WON'T YOU JUST CARE!</u>

JoBeth needed time--in this case several days--to respond in a way that was not defensive, that acknowledged Rachel's pain, that shared her frustration and loneliness. The journal response was very different from similar face to face confrontations.

We would like to stress that the development of relationships, a primary goal, was accompanied by growth of each writer as an individual. Both Mikey and Tim have learned to become more sensitive to each other's feelings. They have used their journals to vent their own feelings and to empathize with the feelings of another. Even small joys and hurts were dealt with in a sensitive fashion. Rachel learned to express her feelings in writing, to develop an extended argument, to listen and respond to another person's feelings in addition to expressing her own. JoBeth learned to listen for the feelings as well as the words, to be an active listener reflecting back to Rachel what she "heard" her saying and feeling. She also was able to reflect on herself as a parent in a much more intentional way.

Getting It Going

How, then, might teachers promote dialogue journals to parents and children? We offer several possibilities, to be tried individually or in combinations.

1. Encourage students to initiate the journals with their parents. An excellent way to keep students writing over the summer is to encourage dialogue journals with parents. The school or PTA might even provide the journals. Students could write the initial entry in class before the end of the school year. There they can reflect on and discuss what they want to say before taking the journal home.

2. Share excerpts from student-teacher dialogue journals you have begun. Show parents how their children have responded. Be sure to get student permission for passages you select, or have students choose the passages. The first parent-teacher conference or open house of the year might be a good time to discuss this possibility.

3. Draft a flyer telling parents how to get the dialogue journal going and tips on keeping it going. The flyer could include sample entries between parents and children.

4. Suggest a program for a PTA meeting. Briefly present some benefits of parent-child dialogue journals (such as the ones shared here), invite parents who have written with their children to field questions and provide some actual examples of journals. It might be helpful to conclude such a session with small group discussions of possible pitfalls and practical strategies for making the experience successful.

5. Parents who are not literate, or who feel uncomfortable with writing, may need special support and encouragement from you. They may need your assurance that the messages are more important than the form for both themselves and their children, that you learn along with your students just as they will learn along with their children. They may need to begin with short entries, or even have you help with early writing and decoding of their children's entries.

6. Have a journal workshop where parents can come to your room, learn about the dialogue journal possibilities and make their own journals with materials the school supplies (cardboard covers, laminating material and press, lined paper, etc.). Encourage whole families to come and participate. Perhaps you could end the session with one written exchange by everyone.

In a time when we are becoming increasingly aware of the powerful influence of the home on schooling, and seeking to foster home-school partnerships, encouraging parent-child dialogue journals offers an excellent opportunity to nurture this relationship. While we know that not all parents will become involved, we can say with confidence that those who do will benefit as much as their children. We have.

Postscript

Mother: I just want to tell you, I don't blame, or dislike you or your decision. I know it was a hard one for you to make. I want you to know, I'm behind you 100%. And I'll love you always. No matter where we are. Love ya, Rache

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